

# **Development Review Process Evaluation**



**Conducted by the Budget and Evaluation Department**

**September 2012**

# Executive Summary

A study of the development review process was requested by City administration in 2010. The staff was asked to analyze the development review process both before and after the reorganization that resulted in the Development Services Division in 2011. This review analyzed two aspects of the development review process. First, it analyzed the actual process that submitted Technical Review Committee (TRC) plans go through to be approved. Second, it analyzed the amount of time it takes for a TRC plan to be approved in the development review process.

The following changes were made in the development review process as part of the reorganization:

- 1) **Electronic Plan Review** – Site plans and subdivisions needing to be reviewed by TRC are now being submitted in an electronic format.
- 2) **Moving a Representative from Each Department into Development Services Every Workday** – Now there are representatives from each department in the Development Services Division that are available in one location for plan submitters.
- 3) **Pre-Development Meetings (optional)** – This option allows for plan submitters to get feedback on plans before they are submitted, which could lead to a time savings for plan submitters. This option is available to plan submitters any day of the workweek as a walk-in.
- 4) **More Technical Review Committee Meetings** – TRC staff can meet 8 am to 12 pm any day of the week. Before this change the committee only met once a week.

In addition, plan submittal statistics were taken from a four month period before the reorganization in 2010 and a four month period after the reorganization in 2011 to evaluate the impact of process changes on selected performance measures. In Table #1, below, the main statistics from the two four month periods can be found.

**Table #1**

Development Review Statistics	Pre-reorganization Statistics	Post Reorganization Statistics
High Priority Version Compliance (Turnaround in 5 Business Days or Less)	97.4%	95.5%
Number of High Priority Versions Submitted	38	66
Normal Priority Version Compliance (Turnaround in 10 Business Days or Less)	90.5%	89.2%
Number of Normal Priority Versions Submitted	74	83
Average Number of Plan Versions Submitted to City Staff Before Plan Approval	4	4
Average Business Days until Plan Approval (Submission to Approval)	79	69
Average Business Days Plans Are under Review by Staff	26	25
Percent of the Time Plans Are in the Hands of City Staff	33.0%	36.0%

Performance as measured by several statistics remained steady or even improved after the reorganization with an increased workload (Please see Table #1). While the plan versions went up, in the post reorganization period by 33%, the compliance turnaround period stayed quite similar for high and normal priority versions (high priority versions should be given back within 5 business days and normal priority versions should be given back within 10 business days). In addition, the average number of plan versions submitted to city staff before plan approval, the average amount of time plans are under review by staff, and percent of the time plans are in the hands of city staff either stayed the same or was close to the pre-reorganization period. The only statistic that saw major movement was the average business days before plan approval, which saw a 10 day decrease.

Five review points saw an increase of more than 5 percentage points in the frequency they were not approved or conditionally approved from the pre-reorganization to the post reorganization time periods. In addition, one review point saw a decrease of more than 5 percentage points. The following are the five review points that saw an increase: Landscaping (13.7%), Planning (11.6%), Stormwater

Conveyance (6.5%), Watershed Protection – Stormwater (5.6%), and Soil Erosion (5.0%). On the other hand, Zoning saw a decrease (9.6%).

This review made one recommendation to the development review process linked to further education of plan submitters. It would be in the interest of the development review process to look for educational opportunities to provide additional information to submitters, so they may be better prepared before submitting plans. Staff should consider an additional focus on the areas of Building Inspections, Watershed Protection-Stormwater, Transportation, Utilities-Sewer, Stormwater Conveyance, Planning, Landscaping, and Soil Erosion as these were the areas that were most often “Not Approved” or increased in frequency in not being approved during the two time periods. Also, staff could focus on educating the public on other review processes/permits that need to be finished/obtained before or simultaneously with the TRC process (i.e. drive-way permit, utility design review, etc.).

Lastly, the limitations of this review were highlighted. This study only looked at quantitative aspects of development review. If further studies are conducted on this process they should look at areas of the process that are qualitative like staff interaction with the public and with each other to determine if stakeholder expectations are being met and all possible efficiencies are being obtained.

# Introduction

In 2010, the City of Greensboro administration requested a review of its development review process. Since the 2010 request, the development review process has been altered with a more centralized TRC site plan and subdivision review process being implemented. The expectation of this review, knowing that the change in the development review process was coming, was to create a baseline against which the revised development review process could be evaluated. Once the baseline was created this review would measure the development process after the organizational change to see if any improvement had been made.

This review is organized into eight different sections. The following are the sections with a short description of each:

- Development Review Process Pre-Reorganization – This section will go through the development review process as it was in 2010.
- Data Analysis Pre-Reorganization– This section looks at the amount of time required to have a TRC plan reviewed by the City. In addition, this section highlights which type of plans find difficulties navigating the plan review process.
- Development Review Process Changes after the Reorganization – This section will show the changes to the development review process due to the changes, which included centralized site plan and subdivision review process being implemented.
- Data Analysis Post Reorganization – This section looks at the amount of time required to have a plan reviewed by the City post reorganization.
- Pre-reorganization and Post Reorganization Data Analysis Comparison – In this section there will be a short discussion on the different statistics that were obtained in the pre-reorganization and post reorganization data analysis.
- Development Review Best Practices – This section gives examples of best practices that could be useful for the process.
- Recommendation –The recommendation in this section could possibly help the new process.
- Limitations and Further Methods of Study – This section looks at the limitations of this study and it recommends further methods on how to study the City’s development process.

## Development Review Process

The development review process in the City of Greensboro is a multi-departmental, complex process that is directed by Chapter 30 in the Land Development Ordinance (LDO), which establishes the procedures, boards, power, and the regulation of land development. Article 3 of the LDO establishes the duties and responsibilities of the Technical Review Committee (TRC), which is a multi-departmental group that is primarily responsible for the review of submitted commercial and residential development plans. The TRC is comprised of 7 members with one representative from each of the following departments/divisions who is appointed by their department head:

- Planning & Community Development Department(Administration Division)
- Planning & Community Development Department (Planning Division)
- Engineering & Inspections Department (Engineering Division)
- Parks & Recreation Department
- Transportation Department
- Water Resources Department (Engineering Division)
- Water Resources Department (Stormwater Division)

The TRC has final decision-making authority for the following:

- **Site Plans** – These include plans for the following:
  - New principal buildings that are not a single family or duplex dwelling on an existing lot.
  - Expansions of buildings, parking areas, or open areas of land where the amount of expansion area exceeds 3,000 square feet.
  - New cell tower or co-location of an existing owner that does not meet current standards.
  - Changes in use that result in an increase of 2 or more in the land use classification number (e.g. house to office).
  - Paving a lawfully created, existing gravel parking lot that has more than 10 spaces.
- **Major Subdivision Preliminary Plats** – Preliminary subdivisions included are the following:
  - Group Development Plans (e.g. more than one building, tenant on one lot with one owner)
  - Integrated Multiple Use Development (e.g. multiple owners - shopping center)
  - Single Family and Two Family Plats (e.g. dwelling on a new lot)
  - Townhouse (e.g. attached dwellings on a new lot)
  - Condominium (e.g. convey dwellings only)
- **Type 2 Modifications** – There are five classes of modifications. These modifications are specified technical exceptions that may be approved only when certain general criteria have been met. The different types correspond to the increasing sensitivity or impact differential of the proposed change, or the authority responsible for approving the modification. The level of review required corresponds with the degree of deviation and/or the anticipated impacts of the requested modification. Type 2 modifications involve alterations to regulations and standards that are typically minor like Type 1, but these need inter-agency review (See Table #2 for a summary of the five types of modifications).

**Table #2**

Modifications		
Type	Description	Final Approval
1	Modifications to regulations and standards that are very minor (de minimis) in nature. Regulations and standards are eligible for modification through the Type 1 procedure only when expressly authorized by the ordinance.	Department Director with general responsibility for administering and interpreting the subject regulation or standard
2	Modifications to regulations and standards that are similar to Type 1 Modifications but which benefit from inter-agency review. Regulations and standards are eligible for modification through the Type 2 procedure only when expressly authorized by the ordinance.	Technical Review Committee
3	Modifications at a level requiring evaluation by a public body comparing it to City policy and its citywide impact. Regulations and standards are eligible for modification through the Type 3 procedure only when expressly authorized by the ordinance.	Reviewed by Technical Review Committee; Approved by Planning Board
4	Modification at a level requiring evaluation by the policy makers. Regulations and standards are eligible for modification through the Type 4 procedure only when expressly authorized by the ordinance.	Reviewed by Technical Review Committee and Planning Board; Approved by City Council
5	Modifications to major watershed standards, and state law requires that such decisions be made by the Environmental Management Commission. Regulations and standards are eligible for modification through the Type 5 procedure only when expressly authorized by the ordinance.	Reviewed by Technical Review Committee, Planning Board, and City Council; Approved by North Carolina Environmental Management Commission

- **Watershed Plans/ Stormwater Management Plans** – These plans depict how the stormwater runoff on the site will be handled in accordance with the water quality and water quantity requirements of the LDO.

The TRC has review and recommendation authority for the following:

- **Type 3, 4 and 5 Modifications** – The TRC reviews and offers recommendations to the following:
  - The Planning Board is authorized to approve Type 3 modifications.
  - The City Council is authorized to approve Type 4 modifications.
  - The North Carolina Environmental Management Commission is authorized to approve Type 5 modifications (these typically involve modifications to major watershed standards).
- **Site Specific Development Plans** – This is a plan that has been submitted by a landowner describing with reasonable certainty the type and intensity of use for a specific parcel(s) of property. It establishes a zoning vested right for the specified land regardless of the owner. These must be in compliance with NCGS 160A-344.1.
- **Street, Alley and Walkway Closings** – The TRC reviews and offers recommendations to City Council related requests to eliminate a public right-of-way (street), alley or walkway that may have been dedicated as part of a subdivision.
- **Street Name Changes/Assignments** – The TRC reviews and offers recommendations to City Council related requests to either change an existing street name or to assign a name to a new street that is not part of a subdivision.
- **Unified Development Plans** – These are master site plans for the development of an area of land under unified ownership or control that are to be developed and improved as a single entity under the Planned Unit Development Zoning District. It includes the concept plan with proposed phase lines, the master sign plan or common sign plan, and documents that specify proposed setbacks or other regulations governing building placement. The plan must show all phases in the expected order.
- **Traditional Neighborhood Development Plans** – A master site plan for the development of one or more compact, mixed use, and pedestrian-oriented neighborhoods to be located in the Traditional Neighborhood Zoning District, upon zoning approval. This includes a list of permitted uses and standards and a defined set of design guidelines for physical improvements and public spaces.

The TRC also has authority to hear and decide appeals of decisions on the following:

- Minor Subdivisions Preliminary Plats
- Final Subdivision Plats
- Site Grading Plans
- Type 1 Modifications

#### **Plan Review Applications and Review Points (Baseline Process: 2010)**

Before submitting an application for any development approval, applicants are encouraged to schedule a “sketch plan” review with the TRC to discuss the procedures, standards, and regulations required for development approval in accordance with this ordinance.

Prior to January 2011 and the creation of the centralized site review process, applicants would submit the application, the design review form, 14 paper copies (sets if more than one page) of the plan, and

the appropriate review fee to the City's Planning Department. The Planning Coordinator would then enter the project into the Plan Review Tracking System, and one copy of each plan would be hand-delivered to each of the various reviewers throughout the City.

The plan reviewers would review the plan based on the following points:

**Planning**

- Landscaping
- Tree Preservation
- Design Review
- Zoning
- Planning
- Addressing
- Plan Coordinator

**Water Resources**

- Stormwater
- Watershed
- Water and Sewer

**Engineering and Inspections**

- Building Inspections
- Soil Erosion

**Parks and Recreation**

**Field Operations**

- Solid Waste

**Transportation**

Each plan reviewer must review the plan and give it one of the following classifications: approve, conditionally approve, or not approve within the City's given policy timeline. The City's policy for plan review gives 10 business days to complete the review by all reviewers and forward the comments (mark-up) to the applicant. For those plans that are resubmitted within 14 calendar days of the completed review, the turnaround time is five business days. After each reviewer has approved the plan, the Planning Coordinator notifies all the TRC members that a meeting will be held the following Tuesday. Once the Planning Coordinator has scheduled the meeting, he/she organizes all the plan information for the TRC meeting and submitter addresses all conditional approvals. At the TRC meeting, the committee votes on the final approval of the plan. After final approval, the plan submitter is notified immediately.

## **Data Analysis Pre-Reorganization**

The sample of projects selected for analysis in this section of the study includes all projects that had one or more versions reviewed during the months of June, July, August, and September of 2010. Projects that were not approved by August of 2011 were removed from the sample for purposes of data analysis. These active projects were removed because final approval was needed to complete a full analysis of the process.

The June through September 2010 time period was chosen because it led up to the City making organizational changes moving toward a more centralized building plan review. The expectation was

that a sample from this time period would give a good representation of the amount of time required to have a plan reviewed by the City prior to any efficiencies that might be gained through the organizational changes scheduled to take place.

***Finding: During the review period, 97.4% of High Priority Versions and 90.5% of Normal Versions were reviewed within the stated goal of 5 business days and 10 business days respectively.***

During this time period, 112 versions of various plans were submitted to the City for review. Of these, 38 were High Priority Versions and 74 were Normal Versions. High Priority is defined as plans that have been revised to address all staff comments and resubmitted without major revisions within 14 calendar days from the completion of the previous review. The target review time for High Priority Versions is 5 business days while the review time for Normal Priority Versions is 10 business days. The following table shows that 97.4% of High Priority Versions and 90.5% of Normal Versions were reviewed within the target time period.

**Table #3**

	High Priority Versions	Completed < 6 Days	%	Normal Versions	Completed < 11 Days	%
June	9	9	100.0%	19	19	100.0%
July	13	13	100.0%	17	15	88.2%
August	14	13	92.9%	14	12	85.7%
September	2	2	100.0%	24	21	87.5%
Total	38	37	97.4%	74	67	90.5%

From June 2010 through September 2010 there was at least one version of 55 individual projects reviewed.<sup>1</sup> As of August 2011, 39 or 71% had been approved (30 Released for Permit, 9 Preliminary Plan Approved) while the remaining 16 were waiting for additional action from the party that submitted the plans. The status breakdown of these cases was as follows:

**Table #4**

Status	# of Cases	%
Released for Permit	30	55%
Active	12	22%
Preliminary Plat Approved	9	16%
Returned	2	4%
Holding for Fee	1	2%
Pick Up for Revision	1	2%
	55	100%

***Finding: When controlling for projects that were still active, it takes on average 79 business days for project plans to be approved (date of submission through final approval). On average, the City has control of approximately 33% of the time required to review and approve a submitted plan. The remaining time consists of waiting for a response from the submitting party. Each project averages 4 plan submissions.***

Based on the 55 projects reviewed during the sample time period, the average number of versions/submissions of plans was 4 with a high of 9 and a low of 1. Of these 55 projects, 16 remained active or required additional action from the submitter. Of the 39 remaining projects, plans remain in the system (date of submission through date of final approval) for an average of 79 business days, while

<sup>1</sup> Note: The figures in Table #3 include resubmissions of the same project.



the average number of business days the plan was actually under review by the City was 26. This would indicate that for the subset of projects, the City has control of approximately 33% of the amount of total business days in the system. The other 67% of business days in the system is comprised of the days that the submitting party is responding to comments from staff and revising the plan in order to gain approval. It is important to remember that these averages include time in which the submitting party is addressing the comments made by staff during the review.

In an effort to determine if there were specific areas that were more commonly responsible for delaying the approval of a project, the review details were pulled from the Plan Review Tracking System, which included 55 projects reviewed during a 4 month review period. A total of 28 projects were selected by listing the 55 projects in ascending order based on project number and choosing every other project beginning with the first. Of these 28 projects, 23 (82%) had reached some stage of approval while 5 were still active.

***Finding: Building Inspections, Watershed Protection-Stormwater, Transportation, and Utilities – Sewer are the departments/divisions that most often require changes prior to approval, thus requiring additional revisions/information from the submitting party.***

The review details for the 28 projects were evaluated, noting for each version the departments or divisions with a review point status of “Not Approved.” A status of “Conditionally Approved” was only noted when there were no more Departments/Divisions noting “Not Approved” (meaning the Conditional Approvals were the final step to approval). Building Inspections had the most instances of non-approval with 37. Meanwhile, Watershed Protection-Stormwater (31), Transportation (29), and Water Resources-Sewer Utilities (26) rounded out the top 4 with regard to instances of non-approval.<sup>2</sup> The following table notes the number of occurrences that a version of a plan was either “Not Approved” or the “Conditional Approval” was the final step to final approval.

**Table #5**

Review Areas	"Not Approved" or "Conditionally Approved"	Percent of Total Versions
Building Inspection	37	37.4%
Watershed Protection - Stormwater	31	31.3%
Transportation	29	29.3%
Utilities - Sewer	26	26.3%
Planning Coordinator	16	16.2%
Zoning	16	16.2%
Tree Preservation	14	14.1%
Stormwater Conveyance	13	13.1%
Planning	12	12.1%
Landscaping	10	10.1%
Soil Erosion	4	4.0%
Solid Waste	4	4.0%
Design Review	1	1.0%

Although the most common reason for resubmittals is the applicant not sufficiently addressing the comments from the previous review, the following are other explanations for a plan not being approved:

<sup>2</sup> Note: For the 28 projects in the subset, there were 99 total versions reviewed.

Building Inspections – Typically, the site plan is submitted before the building design is complete. Since the building permit review process is separate from the TRC process, final design of the building triggers changes to the site layout during the review process.

Watershed Protection – Stormwater – The complexity of the regulations and the number of options available for compliance.

Transportation – At times, Greensboro Department of Transportation is waiting on the applicant to file for a driveway permit, which is a process that is separate from the TRC. Also, the application can be missing or have incomplete information. Lastly, the City will not approve a transportation plan if it is still waiting for state approval.

Utilities- Sewer – In some cases, the applicant will submit for TRC approval prior to the completion of the final horizontal design of the utilities. Since the utility design review process is separate from the TRC process and can occur during the TRC review process, design changes could trigger changes to the site layout. Also, there seems to be cases where applications have missing or incomplete information.

## **Development Review Process Changes after the Reorganization**

In January 2011, the centralized site plan and subdivision review process was implemented. Below are the changes that were made as part of the implementation:

- 1) Electronic Plan Review** – Site plans and subdivisions needing to be reviewed by TRC are now submitted in an electronic format. The City's Electronic Plan Review system allows the development community to download plans via a Web-based file management system. This process allows for a quicker turnaround by City staff by allowing plans to be sent electronically instead of sending plans through City mail to each review point, faster plan analysis, and staff comments now get back to plan submitters in a quicker fashion due to it being emailed to the submitter. In addition, this process allows plan submitters to know where their plans are in the TRC process, which creates greater accountability.
- 2) Moving a Representative from Each Department into Development Services Every Workday** – Now there are representatives available in one location for plan submitters, by invitation or walk-in, from the departments that play a major part in the development review process. These departments include Engineering and Inspections, Transportation, Water Resources, and Planning. In addition, different inspection staff from multiple departments is available, which includes Construction Review, Building Inspections, Plumbing Inspections, Electrical Inspections, Mechanical Inspections, Fire Inspections, and Soil Erosion Control Inspections.
- 3) Pre-Development Meetings (optional)** – Plan submitters have the option to request a Pre-Development Meeting with TRC staff. This option allows plan submitters to get feedback on projects before they are submitted, which could lead to a time savings for plan submitters. This option is available to plan submitters any day of the workweek as a walk-in.
- 4) More Technical Review Committee Meetings** – TRC staff can now meet between 8 am to 12 pm any day of the week as long as there is a plan ready for approval (as in the past the Plan Coordinator organizes the meeting). Before this change the committee only met once a week. By being available to meet daily this eliminated any delay between when the plan was approved by all review points and formal approval by the TRC. In the past it could take up to 6 days for a plan to receive approval, which is the time between the plans approval by all review points and final approval by the TRC.

## Data Analysis Post Reorganization

The sample of projects selected for analysis in this section of the study includes all projects that had one or more versions reviewed during the months of May, June, July, and August of 2011. Projects that were not approved by August of 2012 were removed from the sample for purposes of data analysis. These active projects were removed because final approval was needed to complete a full analysis of the process.

The second sample analyzed as part of this study, which occurred after the creation of the Development Services Area. The expectation was that a sample from this time period would give a good representation of the amount of time required to have a plan reviewed by the City after the creation of the Development Services Area.

***Finding: During the review period, 95.5% of High Priority Versions and 89.2% of Normal Versions were reviewed within the stated goal of 5 business days and 10 business days respectively.***

During this time period, 149 versions of various plans were submitted to the City for review. Of these, 66 were High Priority Versions and 83 were Normal Versions. The following table shows that 95.5% of High Priority Versions and 89.2% of Normal Versions were reviewed within the target time period.

**Table #6**

	High Priority Versions	Completed < 6 Days	%		Normal Versions	Completed < 11 Days	%
May	22	21	95.5%		24	19	79.2%
June	26	25	96.2%		23	23	100.0%
July	10	9	90.0%		15	12	80.0%
August	8	8	100.0%		21	20	95.2%
Total	66	63	95.5%		83	74	89.2%

From May 2011 through August 2011 there was at least one version of 61 individual projects reviewed.<sup>3</sup> As of August 2012, 51 or 84% had been approved (36 Released for Permit, 14 Preliminary Plan Approved, and 1 Stormwater Management Plan Approved) while the remaining 10 were waiting for additional action from the party that submitted the plans. The status breakdown of these cases was as follows:

**Table #7**

Status	# of Cases	%
Released for Permit	36	59%
Preliminary Plat Approved	14	23%
Active	9	15%
Stormwater Management Plan Approved	1	2%
Waiting for Recording of Final Plat	1	2%
	61	100%

***Finding: When controlling for projects that were still active, it takes on average 69 business days for project plans to be approved (date of submission through final approval). On average, the City has control of approximately 36% of the time required to review and approve a submitted plan. The remaining time consists of waiting for a response from the submitting party. Each project averages 4 plan submissions.***

<sup>3</sup> Note: The figures in Table #6 include resubmissions of the same project.

Based on the 61 projects reviewed during the sample time period, the average number of versions/submissions of plans was 4 with a high of 8 and a low of 1. Of these 61 projects, 10 remained active or required additional action from the submitter. Of the 51 remaining projects, plans remain in the system (date of submission through date of final approval) for an average of 69 business days, while the average number of business days the plan was actually under review by the City was 25. This would indicate that for the subset of projects, the City has control of approximately 36% of the amount of total days in the system. The other 64% of days in the system is comprised of the days that the submitting party is responding to comments from staff and revising the plan in order to gain approval. It is important to remember that these averages include time in which the submitting party is addressing the comments made by staff during the review.

In an effort to determine if there were specific areas that were more commonly responsible for delaying the approval of a project, the review details were pulled from the Plan Review Tracking System, which included 61 projects reviewed during a 4 month review period. A total of 31 projects were selected by listing the 61 projects in ascending order based on project number and choosing every other project beginning with the first. Of these 31 projects, 26 (84%) had reached some stage of approval while 5 were still active.

***Finding: Planning Coordinator, Watershed Protection-Stormwater, Building Inspections, and Utilities-Sewer are the departments/divisions that most often require changes prior to approval, thus requiring additional revisions/information from the submitting party.***

The review details for the 31 projects were then evaluated, noting for each version the departments or divisions with a review point status of “Not Approved.” A status of “Conditionally Approved” was only noted when there were no more Departments/Divisions noting “Not Approved” (meaning the Conditional Approvals were the last road block to final approval). Planning Coordinator had the most instances of non-approval with 93. Meanwhile, Watershed Protection-Stormwater (45), Building Inspections (41), and Utilities – Sewer (34) rounded out the top 4 with regard to instances of non-approval.<sup>4</sup> The following table notes the number of occurrences that a version of a plan was either “Not Approved” or the “Conditional Approval” was the final step to final approval.

**Table #8**

Review Areas	The Occurrences of Plan Version Is "Not Approved" or "Conditionally Approved"	Percent of Time a Plan Versions Is "Not Approved" or Conditionally Approved"
Planning Coordinator	93	76.2%
Watershed Protection-Stormwater	45	36.9%
Building Inspections	41	33.6%
Utilities-Sewer	34	27.9%
Transportation	32	26.2%
Landscaping	29	23.8%
Planning	29	23.8%
Stormwater Conveyance	24	19.7%
Tree Preservation	21	17.2%
Soil Erosion	11	9.0%
Zoning	8	6.6%
Solid Waste	4	3.3%
Community Development	4	3.3%
Address Coordinator	2	1.6%

<sup>4</sup> Note: For the 32 projects in the subset, there were 122 total versions reviewed.

There was only one major difference in the top reasons why plans were not approved between the pre-reorganization and post reorganization, and the change was a large increase in the Planning Coordinator not approving plans.

The reason for the increase of non-approvals by the Planning Coordinator has to do with the TRC now meeting daily instead of weekly. For example, before a plan goes to the TRC and after it has been approved by all the different review points (e.g. Transportation, Planning, etc.), the Planning Coordinator holds the plan for a day (this accounts for a not approval), so he/she can take time to gather all the necessary materials for the TRC plan review meeting the following day (the Planning Coordinator not approving the plan does not cause the plan submitter to submit a new version). Now with the TRC meeting more often the Planning Coordinator has been declining more plans; however, declining a plan at this point only delays the overall approval process by one day, which allows for the TRC to receive a well organized presentation for a plan, which can enhance its ability to receive approval.

## Pre-reorganization and Post Reorganization Data Analysis Comparison

***Finding: The post reorganization process posted similar performance statistics compared to the pre-reorganization process while handling a 33% increase in workload.***

At first glance when comparing the statistics from the pre-reorganization and post reorganization it looks like both samples provide very similar outcomes. For example, compliance with the high priority version and normal priority version turnaround outcomes were very similar for both samples (Please see Table #9). However, it should be noted that Development Services staff managed a larger number of plans in the post reorganization sample. Even with the larger amount of plans, in the post reorganization sample, City staff was able to help plan submitters keep the average number of plan versions submitted before plan approval, the average amount of time plans are under review by staff, and percent of the time plans are in the hands of city staff the same or close to the pre-reorganization levels.

***Finding: The total number of business days required from initial submittal to approval did decrease in the post reorganization time period.***

In the post reorganization sample, the average number of business days before approval decreased. The average business days before approval for a plan in the pre-reorganization was 79 days while the post reorganization was 69 days.

**Table #9**

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Number of Normal Priority Versions Submitted	74	83
Average Number of Plan Versions Submitted to City Staff Before Plan Approval	4	4
Average Business Days until Plan Approval (Submission to Approval)	79	69
Average Business Days Plans Are under Review by Staff	26	25
Percent of the Time Plans Are in the Hands of City Staff	33.0%	36.0%

***Finding: Five review points saw an increase of more than 5 percentage points in the frequency it was not approved or conditionally approved from the pre-reorganization to the post reorganization process. In addition, one review point saw a decrease of more than 5 percentage points.***

The following are the 5 review points that saw a higher frequency of not approval or conditional approval: Landscaping (13.7%), Planning (11.6%), Stormwater Conveyance (6.5%), Watershed Protection

– Stormwater (5.6%), and Soil Erosion (5.0%). On the other hand, Zoning saw a lower frequency of not approval or conditional approval (9.6%).

**Table #10**

Review Areas	Pre-organization	Post Reorganization	Change in Percentage Points from Pre-reorganization to Post Reorganization
Planning Coordinator	16.2%	76.2%	60.1%
Watershed Protection-Stormwater	31.3%	36.9%	5.6%
Building Inspections	37.4%	33.6%	-3.8%
Utilities-Sewer	26.3%	27.9%	1.6%
Transportation	29.3%	26.2%	-3.1%
Landscaping	10.1%	23.8%	13.7%
Planning	12.1%	23.8%	11.6%
Stormwater Conveyance	13.1%	19.7%	6.5%
Tree Preservation	14.1%	17.2%	3.1%
Soil Erosion	4.0%	9.0%	5.0%
Zoning	16.2%	6.6%	-9.6%
Solid Waste	4.0%	3.3%	-0.8%
Community Development	0.0%	3.3%	3.3%
Address Coordinator	0.0%	1.6%	1.6%
Design Review	1.0%	0.0%	-1.0%

Of the review points that saw an increase in frequency of not approval or conditional approval, the following is the main reason for each increase (please be aware that each reason for the increase is anecdotal and was taken from conversations with review staff. The information is not supported with statistical data):

**Landscaping** – In July 2010, the City replaced the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) with the LDO. The UDO had the same landscaping rules for most communities in Guilford County. The new LDO rules for landscaping are unique to the City of Greensboro. The increase could be due to the development community learning the new LDO rules for landscaping.

**Planning** – The Planning review point is now giving more non-approvals instead of giving conditional approvals. The reason for this change has to do with the frequency of the TRC Committee meetings. In the pre-reorganization period, the TRC Committee only met weekly. During the pre-reorganization time period, the plan review point would give a conditional approval, so a plan could be changed quickly before the next TRC Committee meeting. Now, the Planning review point cannot give a conditional approval because this would allow a non-conforming plan to go to the TRC Committee the next day without the chance for it to be corrected.

**Stormwater Conveyance** – This review point is seeing more plans with the hydraulic calculation being left out.

**Watershed Protection – Stormwater** – It seems that more plans are being turned in with their calculations not being complete. Also, the State of North Carolina’s rules on stream buffers changed during this time.

**Soil Erosion** – There seems to be a larger amount of plans that are not including a separate plan for soil erosion.

## Best Practices

During the summer of 2006, nine North Carolina cities and the North Carolina School of Government entered into a 21-month corporate-style benchmarking project. The report produced from this project indicates that corporate benchmarking “is deeper (than typical government benchmarking) in that it probes for details about the process rather than simply comparing selected outputs or outcomes” and “is more prescriptive in that it seeks best practices that can be adapted for use in other organizations.” This report highlights best practices from 17 local governments selected from a pool of 161 jurisdictions nominated for their excellence in the development review process. Finally, the jurisdictions of Henderson, Nevada; Tallahassee, Florida; and San Diego, California were selected by the School of Government due to best practices that they follow.

The three jurisdictions selected for in-depth review were found to have several process characteristics in common. These included the following:

- Creating a “one stop shop” approach – brining as many functions together as possible.
- Appointing a process manager whose focus is entirely on managing and improving the review process.
- Having a close working relationship with IT staff or even having IT support staff committed directly to development review.
- Matching services and costs to the demand for development services – two of the jurisdictions operated development services as an enterprise fund.
- Providing high quality and effective stakeholder engagement (e.g. stakeholder education sessions, informative hard-copy educational materials, use of a website for education, and regular opportunities for customer feedback through surveys).
- Providing for electronic submission of applications, a GIS interface for the review process, electronic access to reviewers’ comments, access to current status of application and plan processing, and departmental/employee performance reporting.

Other best practices or “intriguing ideas” that were highlighted in the report include the following:

- Using standard boilerplate wording that promotes consistent explanations/communications but still permits variation as needed (San Diego, CA).
- Requiring reviewers to indicate whether resubmittals are due to staff or applicant error (San Diego, CA).
- Expediting reviews at the request of applicants on a special fee basis (Tallahassee, FL).
- Contracting with outside firms that specialize in development review to handle spikes in demand (Henderson, NV and San Diego, CA).
- Allowing for expedited review of projects related to economic/community development or a targeted industry (Vancouver, WA and Prince William County, VA).
- Publishing a “Top 10” list of the reasons applications are turned down during development review process (Carrollton, TX and San Antonio, TX).
- Limiting the number of resubmittals allowed for a single project, which provides an incentive for applicants to begin the process prepared and take feedback seriously (Aurora, CO).
- Requiring in-person appointments for resubmittals (San Diego, CA).

## **Recommendations**

In previous years, the City of Greensboro has implemented a number of the best practices previously referenced, including moving to a one stop shop for development review and implementing an electronic plan review process that requires all plans reviewed by the TRC to be submitted electronically. Plans may also be tracked through the process by the submitting party by using the electronic plan tracking system. Based on the findings in the data analysis section and a review of best practices, the following recommendation should be considered:

- Look for educational opportunities to provide additional information to submitters, so they may be better prepared before submitting plans. Staff should consider an additional focus on the areas of Building Inspections, Watershed Protection-Stormwater, Transportation, Utilities-Sewer, Stormwater Conveyance, Planning, Landscaping, and Soil Erosion as these were the areas that were most often “Not Approved” or increased in frequency in not being approved during the two time periods. Also, staff could focus on educating the public on other review processes/permits that need to be finished/obtained before or simultaneously with the TRC process (i.e. drive-way permit, utility design review, etc.). By educating plan submitters with print literature, online literature, and video clips, the TRC staff could hopefully assist in reducing the amount of versions that submitters are turning in and the amount of time it takes for plan submitters to provide versions of her/his plan.

The above recommendation was formulated after it came to staff’s attention that there was little educational information on the City’s website about the complicated plan submittal process. It would seem that further education, in one easy location to find, would allow for quicker access to plan information for the development community while possibly helping to lower the average amount of business days for plan approval.

## **Limitations and Further Methods of Study**

This study concentrated on quantifiable data regarding performance measures associated with the development review process. Additional areas of study include looking at areas of the process that are qualitative like staff interaction with the public and with each other to see if stakeholder expectations are being met and all possible efficiencies are being obtained.